

Reflections on the Le Dain commission interim report

Bob Hunter

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I.

Like every other advanced industrial nation, Canada has its old and its new *cultures*. These cultures, here as *elsewhere*, are on a collision course, mainly because the new one — the counter culture — tends to reverse almost all the priorities of the old.

Philip E. Slater argues in a new book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness — American Culture at The Breaking Point*, that these differences are fundamental and cannot be resolved by simple compromise.

“A cultural system is a dynamic whole ... change must therefore affect the motivational roots of a society or it is not change at all ... prolonged, unplanned collision will nullify both cultures, like bright pigments combining into grey.

“The transition must be : as deft as possible if we are to minimize the destructive chaos that inevitably accompanies significant cultural transformations.”



In the new (and by a all In the new (and by a all earlier standards, alien) world fashioned by our technology, the gathering forces of change can only be resisted at the enormous risk of disembowelling our own potential for growth.

Evolution, from the viewpoint of the species being surpassed, is always a corrupt business, an endless process of “degeneration” from standards which already exist and which are held to be the best, even though the world to which they represented an adaptation has ceased to exist.

That’s one of those horrible facts of life which real “maturity” allows us to appreciate without flying off the deep end, seeking to destroy our own children lest they surpass us.

The U.S. situation is different, of course, in that the counter culture cannot extricate itself from the explosive issues of racism and militarisms. It is forced by circumstances, to. battle the old culture head-on.

A civil war to that effect has already begun and cannot be turned back now except by larger and larger doses of repression — until, sooner or later, something breaks. Either the spirit of the young, or the determination of the old.

As political analyst Samuel has pointed out, the “hidden crisis” in America turns on the apparent fact that the juncture of irreversible polarization has been passed. The inability of Americans at this stage to reconcile the conflicts between the old and the new cultures can lead only to violence.

It is a deadly trap, and once a society has plunged into it there is seldom any way back.



Canada would seem not to have yet passed the point of irreversible polarization. But we are probably very close to it. It is likely to be passed within two to five years -unless we move deftly to unlock the door to rational change.

That is, if our own counter culture can be “let in” to society as a whole, it will not be forced- as the young are being forced in America -to storm the door with a battering-ram.

In Canada, as American historian Theodore Roszak told me last year, we still have a chance to make it: to avoid a senseless and mutually destructive conflict between the old and the new cultures.

But only if we begin the serious work of reshaping the motivational roots of our society enough to allow the entry of the outlawed counter culture, with its new blood, new ideas, fresh insights and visions.

It is only in a context this large that the importance of the Le Dain commission inquiry can really be measured. For the issue of the non-medical use of drugs — the psychedelics in particular has become, as Margaret Mead notes, the “chief symbol” of the conflict between the old and the new cultures.

Until there is some rapprochement on this issue, there can be little hope for further easing of the fundamental conflict.

It is a mistake to think of the Le Dain interim report as “a study of pot.” It is much more than that, nothing less than a detailed examination of the social terrain which has become one of the main battlegrounds between the new culture and the old.

What happens on this battleground will largely determine how the conflict go elsewhere.

II.

Most criticism of the Le Dain interim report has been frivolous and fatuous, simply because at a time when the whole world is being ripped inside-out by technologies and pressures we barely understand, the critics are loudly announcing their old • values.

Attorney- General Les Peterson, for instance, has let it be known, in connection with the Le Dain report, that he liked the world better the way it used to be. So what?

The report is probably the best of its kind ever produced. It faced the central issue head on, realizing that what is involved is no isolated “youth phenomenon,” but rather a major shift in values.

The report, from one standpoint, is radical all right: at a time when most countries (the U.S. in particular) are reacting to the question of drug use by becoming more reactionary, not less so, the Le Dain commission suggests an opposite course.

It did not swallow, in effect, the World Health Organization’s definition of drug abuse. WHO considers it “abuse” when any drug is used other than for strictly medical purposes.

To go along with this attitude is to force the counter culture down the road leading to the barricades. For, although no authorities want to admit it yet, the debate over drugs, insofar as it pits young against old, stems from the fact that some of the young are saying that many psychedelic drugs *are good for you*.

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Meanwhile in the other camp, the most that is being allowed is that some drugs, pot for instance, may not be any worse than booze.

When protagonists in any debate are this far apart, no matter how loud they shout they can't possibly hear one another. This is exactly what is happening in the drug debate. And one of the great values of the Le Dain report is that it sets down what each side is saying, allowing those in favor of drug use "equal time" to explain their viewpoint.

It is silly to say the report is biased in favor of the pro-drug people. The shock for most "straight" readers comes from experiencing, for the first time, a fair balance in the presentation of viewpoints. Most official literature about drugs is so deeply, even if unconsciously biased against drugs that this kind of balance never emerges.

So, in this sense, the report is once again radical. It departs strategically from the basic premise that all drug use is a completely bad thing.

It allows — ever so slightly that some people feel that their own sensory, psychological and spiritual needs are served by the use of certain drugs, such as pot, hashish and LSD.

The report never quite gets to it. but comes closer than any other comparable document. to acknowledging that in the eyes of the counter culture, the illicit drug industry is a service industry, not ing more or less.

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The dominant culture wants to rehabilitate drug users, including the users of soft drugs.

And the users of soft drugs, at any rate, want to rehabilitate the dominant culture, by easing its obsessions with power, wealth, consumption and phoniness, one-dimensional human relationships.

Down in the counter culture, the basic premise is that the "straights" are the sick ones. Drugs — soft drugs — are considered to be the only means available for getting enough people out of their deadly ruts in short order. The drug culture has more than its share of evangelists.

The thing to understand about evangelists, or converts on of any kind to any cause, is that they are not amenable to any system of "rehabilitation," because they are convinced that those who would cure them are in fact sicker than they are.

They can only view these “re abilitative efforts” (jail sentences, in particular) as systems of repression, efforts old culture to reject the insights of the new. Dopesmoking thus sometimes takes on the trappings of an overtly the political act.

There have been no authorities around who seemed capable of even acknowledging this. And the refusal to treat the use of psychedelics as anything more than a symptom of mental illness (or 25 “alienation”) as only succeeded in forcing many of the young to put their backs to the authorities, to ignore them or held throw stones at them.

III.

The Le Dain Commission understood one of its functions as being to provide the basis for an informed public debate on the non-medical use of drugs. To date, except for the hearings organized by the commission itself, “public debate” has mainly been a matter of often ill — informed authorities shouting their loathing and fears into the megaphone of the mass media and very little being heard from the other side, except in the underground press.

The Le Dain report, if it accomplishes nothing else, has at least set the stage for an open dialogue.

In order for dialogue to take place, both sides must be allowed to present their beliefs. The alternative to dialogue is — well, look at what’s been happening around English Bay these days. Look at the ghettos and universities in the United States.

Although most advocates of “better living through chemistry” will find the recommendations of the commission disappointingly conservative, and foes will be dismayed at how “radical” it is, the report actually manages to strike a truly objective balance. It allows, for instance, that there is no objectivity if moral judgments are constantly steering the line of argument. The central issue in the drug debate, it acknowledges, is one of opposing value-systems.



For instance, many who do not find it immoral in any way to drive to the supermarket in the jockstrap of a mechanical monster, who do not find it immoral to consume alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, nevertheless find it immoral to be carried off on a trip in the arms of some psychopharmacological “angel.”

The value of psychedelic drugs, in the view of their users, lies in their power — as Reginald Whitaker puts it — “to offer an alternative vision, a glimpse of that which technological society has erased from our consciousness, a sense of the older, deeper, perhaps even the wiser, part of our senses.”

Opponents of the psychedelics can foam at the mouth all they want about these kinds of statements. However, the burden of proof is on those who would deny it. This is precisely the kind of challenge which “the authorities” have not risen to meet. Instead,

they have contented themselves with saying drugs are awful, period. Obviously, many of the kids have long since stopped listening.

The Le Dain report, even if can't do on its own to close the generation gap, should at least go a long ways toward closing the credibility gap which lies in large part at the root of the conflict between the generations. Bob Dylan years ago sang, "Don't criticize what you can't understand, for the times they are a-changing." The assumption among the young has been that "the authorities" don't understand what the use of psychedelic drugs is all about.



The report notes: "The conclusion we draw from the testimony we have heard is that it is a grave error to indulge in deliberate distortion or exaggeration concerning the alleged dangers of a particular drug, or to base a program of drug education upon a strategy of fear.

It is no use playing chicken with young people; in nine cases out of 10 they will accept the challenge. What we have to ask is whether drug use is the way to life; the way to the greater vitality, consciousness and sense of selfworth which they seek."

And: "We believe that the purpose (of drug education) must be to provide the basis for informed and wise personal choice. The ultimate effect that we would hope for is reasonable control and even over-all reduction in the nonmedical use of drugs. But in our opinion that effect is unlikely to be achieved by exhortation or propaganda, but rather by helping people to see where their real personal interest lies — in the long run. Drug education that is not based on a realistic view of human motivation is doomed to failure. We can no longer rely on the appeal to a sense of morality."

And the issue here is that morality is the clothes worn by a given value system. As change, what was once "moral" is suddenly not moral, what was once "immoral" is suddenly not immoral at all. There is nothing "immoral" about the use of at least some drugs in the minds of an ever-increasing portion of our population.

And if the laws are not altered to reflect that change in values, then these people are turned into outlaws. The question is: Do we want to "lock out" the young from the future growth of this country (as the Americans are evidently doing) or do we want to bring them back in?

Appendix: Stick to it

Editor, The Sun, Sir — Bob Hunter, in his column for July 22, appears to be saying that unless Canadians begin to accept the standards of the hippie "counter-culture," they will fall into a "deadly trap" and suffer "destructive chaos." He claims that the U.S. has already fallen into this trap and that it is now in a state of "civil war."

In other words, he is threatening Canada: Accept our values or we hippies will make it so hot for you that you'll wish you had.

As a U.S. citizen and a former resident of Berkeley, California, I can assure you that if there is a civil war in the U.S., it must be the mildest one in history. In all the "destructive chaos," usually the only people who get hurt are the chaos-makers themselves and a few policemen.

The average person is not noticeably affected.

I taught at Berkeley during some of the worst riots there and not one of my classes was disrupted. In other words, the threats are just a lot of hot air.

The middle class has little to fear from any disruption or violence that the counter-culture may create. The thing to be feared is that the counter-culture — and its sympathizers in the mass media — may brainwash the middle class into abandoning its own moral *standards* and becoming hippie itself.

So don't let Bob Hunter frighten you. If you are worried about the hippies, then the best thing you can do is stick fast to your own moral standards and live up to them.

Please note: I am not advocating repressive measures against hippies. I am merely advising the middle class not to let the hippie culture influence them — especially not by threats.

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The Vancouver Sun, July 22-24, 1970, Pages 21, 21 & 8 respectively. Part I, Part II
& Part III.

& The Vancouver Sun, August 14, 1970. <www.newspapers.com> & <archive.org>

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